

The Quality of Record Keeping and Racial Differences in Validated Turnout

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The election administration studies and the vote validation studies conducted as part of the 1986 and 1988 National Election Studies are employed to determine whether the tendency of blacks more often to overreport voting than whites results from the poor quality of record keeping in election offices where black registration and voting records are maintained. Both objective indicators of record-keeping quality and the subjective assessments by the Survey Research Center field staff are employed. The analysis suggests that the tendency of blacks to overreport voting does not result from inferior record keeping in areas where blacks live.

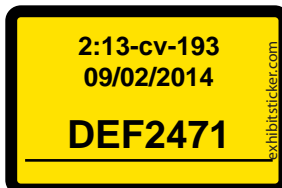
Postelection surveys of the American electorate consistently reveal a larger percentage of reported voters than official estimates of turnout based upon dividing the number of voters by the voting age population. Part of this bias results from nonvoters falsely claiming to have voted. To explore the consequences of voting overreports the 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986, and 1988 National Election Study (NES) surveys checked local registration and voting records to determine whether respondents were registered to vote and whether they voted.¹

Many analyses of these vote validation studies report that blacks are more likely to overreport voting than whites (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1983, 1987, 1991; Abramson and Claggett 1984, 1986, 1989, 1991; Anderson, Silver, and Abramson 1988; Hill and Hurley 1984; Katosh and Traugott 1981; Presser, Traugott, and Traugott 1990; Sigelman 1982; Silver, Anderson, and

¹ Validation checks were also made for respondents in the 1972 and 1974 NES, but they were conducted as part of the 1972–1974–1976 panel study, and the checks were not carried out until 1977. Traugott (1989) considers the 1972 and 1974 validation studies to be highly problematic.

The data used in our analyses were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, which bears no responsibility for our analyses or interpretations. We are grateful to Santa Traugott for her advice about both the vote validation studies and the election administration studies. Ada W. Finifter, Brian D. Silver, and Kenneth C. Williams made helpful comments on earlier versions of this note.

THE JOURNAL OF POLITICS, Vol. 54, No. 3, August 1992
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Abramson 1986; Traugott and Katosh 1979; and Traugott 1989; and for evidence on voter registration, see Claggett 1990.) Although there are other sources of bias in vote overreports (see Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986), the tendency of blacks to overreport voting more than whites is the only major bias that has consistently been identified.

The widely reported finding that blacks are more likely to overreport voting than whites has important implications for understanding racial differences in turnout. For example, the conventional wisdom about racial differences in participation maintained that they resulted from the relatively low socioeconomic status of black Americans (see especially Verba and Nie 1972), and because blacks were more likely than whites to live in the South. Controls for region and SES eliminated or reversed racial differences in reported turnout. But when electoral participation was measured by the vote validation studies, racial differences persisted even after controls were introduced for both region and level of education (see Abramson and Claggett 1984, 1986, 1989, 1991). Moreover, postelection surveys have been used to estimate the contribution of nonwhites to the Democratic presidential coalition (see especially Axelrod 1972). If blacks are more likely than whites to overreport voting, analyses based upon reported electoral participation will overestimate the black contribution to the Democratic coalition (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1983, 1987, 1991).

Despite what appears to be overwhelming evidence of relatively high levels of black overreporting, these findings could result from the relative difficulty of locating black voting records. If the finding that blacks are more likely to falsely report voting than whites results from a methodological artifact, the large number of studies reporting high levels of black overreporting may be misleading. Perhaps, the conventional wisdom about racial differences in electoral participation is correct and studies of reported electoral participation can be used to estimate the black contribution to the Democratic coalition. Indeed, if the major finding based upon the vote validation studies is questionable, the substantial expenditures required to conduct ongoing vote validation checks may be unwarranted.

We raised the possibility that relatively high levels of black overreporting might be artifactual in our original analyses (see Abramson and Claggett 1984). As we pointed out, the classification of respondents as validated voters or nonvoters is based upon attempts to locate their names on the registration lists and to determine whether or not they voted. Error is possible. Records may fail to indicate that an actual voter voted. However, about half of all reported voters who are classified as validated nonvoters are so classified because their names cannot be found on the registration lists. In some cases the failure to find the respondent's name will result from errors by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC) field staff. In other cases the failure to find the respondent's name will result from errors by the local voting officials.

If the areas where blacks are registered keep poorer records than those where whites are registered, actual black voters may be more likely to be classified incorrectly as validated nonvoters. Because blacks tend to live in poorer areas than whites, and because they are more likely than whites to live in the South, black records may be more poorly maintained than white records. Traugott (1989, 21) raises the possibility that "blacks might be located in electoral offices where record-keeping is less well-done than other areas," and Presser, Traugott, and Traugott (1990) argue that blacks may live in areas where records are less accessible.

Until recently there was no way to determine whether black records were more poorly maintained than white records. In 1986 and 1988, however, the SRC and the Center for Political Studies (CPS) conducted election administration studies that interviewed the election officials responsible for maintaining registration and voting records. In 1986, 166 interviews were conducted, and 120 were conducted in 1988. The interviews were designed (1) to learn how the registration and voting records were kept and how they were updated; (2) to study the level of staffing and ease of registration; and (3) to provide an evaluation by the interviewer of the office organization, efficiency, and degree of cooperation.

This note uses the 1986 and 1988 NES surveys, along with the vote validation and the election administration studies for these surveys, to determine whether the apparent tendency of blacks to overreport voting more than whites results from black registration and voting records being maintained more poorly than white records.

OBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF RECORD-KEEPING QUALITY

We examined five questions that provide indicators of the quality with which registration and voting records were maintained, and, as table 1 reveals, we found few racial differences. In both 1986 and 1988, whites and blacks were equally likely to live in areas where the election official reported that there were standard procedures to see if registrants still lived at the address on their registration records. In both years, the vast majority of both whites and blacks lived in areas where there was a master file for all the precincts in the voting jurisdiction. In 1986, whites and blacks were equally likely to live in areas with computerized master files, and in 1988 blacks were significantly more likely than whites to live in an area with computerized master files. In both 1986 and 1988 blacks and whites were about as likely to live in areas where one did not need to know the voters' precinct to find their names on the voting records. And in both years, the vast majority of whites and blacks lived in areas where one could locate their voting records either by knowing their names or by checking their registration records.

Voting officials may exaggerate the quality of record keeping, but unless

TABLE 1
OBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF RECORD-KEEPING QUALITY, BY RACE OF
RESPONDENT: 1986 AND 1988

	1986		1988	
	White	Black	White	Black
Percentage who live where there are standardized procedures to see if registrants still live at the address on their registration records:	65.8% (1,797)	64.7% (320)	58.6% (1,698)	56.1% (269)
Percentage who live where there are master files for all registrants:	96.0% (1,797)	97.5% (320)	98.6% (1,649)	100.0% (266)
Percentage who live where there are computerized master files:	79.9% (1,797)	79.7% (320)	79.1% (1,605)	86.1%* (266)
Percentage who live where one does not need to know the voter's precinct to find person's name on the voting records:	54.1% (1,773)	59.9% (312)	58.5% (1,665)	57.0% (265)
Percentage who live where one does not need to know the voter's precinct to find name on voting record or where one could get this information from his/her registration record:	95.9% (1,773)	96.2% (312)	98.3% (1,665)	100.0% (265)

Source: 1986 and 1988 National Election Studies and the election administration studies for these surveys.

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the totals upon which the percentages are based.

*Difference between whites and blacks significant at $p < .05$.

there is substantial misinformation, there is relatively little difference in basic record-keeping procedures in areas where whites and blacks were interviewed. In addition, there were few systematic differences in the objective quality of record keeping in the South and the rest of the United States and there were few differences in the quality of record keeping for respondents with differing levels of formal education.

INTERVIEWERS' ASSESSMENTS OF RECORD-KEEPING QUALITY

Interviewers were asked to rate the overall quality of record keeping. At the end of the interview with the voting official, interviewers were asked, "Please indicate (by an X on the appropriate number) on the scale below how well-organized, accessible, and accurate the records are in this office." The scale ranged from a high of 1, which indicated that the records were "Excellent. I am very confident that if the respondent is registered, a record would be found." Numbers 2 through 9 were not labelled. The lowest rating was 10, which indicated that the records were "Poor. It is very possible that a registration record does exist for respondents for whom I have been unable to locate one, but the way this office is organized, it would take an infinite amount of time to find it."

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents in 1986 lived in election units rated as excellent, as did 72% of the respondents in 1988. The percentage of whites and of blacks who live in election units with differing interviewer ratings is presented in table 2. As the table reveals, in 1986 whites were somewhat more likely to live in units that were rated as excellent than were blacks, and in 1988 whites were substantially more likely to live in units rated as excellent. However, in both years a majority of blacks lived in units rated as excellent, and, among those who did not, most lived in units scored as "2." In both 1986 and 1988 only a handful of respondents lived in units rated below 3.

These subjective ratings may provide better information about the quality of record keeping than the objective measures we employed. The question directly asks interviewers to answer the very problem we are trying to address: how likely is it that records can be found? Moreover, these subjective ratings were related to other variables that we would expect to be related to the quality of record keeping. In both 1986 and 1988 record keeping was rated as worse for respondents in the South, a finding consistent with Stanley's (1987) discussion of the poor quality of registration records in that region. In 1986 record keeping was significantly better for respondents with relatively high levels of education. In 1986 there was very little relationship between the interviewers' assessments of record-keeping quality and any of our five objective measures, although in 1988 interviewers' ratings were modestly related to using standardized procedures to determine if registrants had moved and to the presence of computerized master files.

To some extent subjective quality of record keeping was related to the actual difficulty interviewers faced in locating records. If this relationship were strong, we would face a serious analytical problem, for we could not distinguish between record-keeping quality and the failure to find records. However, in both 1986 and 1988 the relationship between record-keeping quality and the difficulty interviewers had in locating records was very weak.

TABLE 2
INTERVIEWER'S EVALUATION OF RECORD-KEEPING QUALITY, BY RACE
OF RESPONDENT: 1986 AND 1988

		1986		1988	
		White	Black	White	Black
Percentage who live where the interviewer's evaluation of record keeping is:					
Excellent	1	69.4%	59.1%	75.5%	51.9%
	2	22.8	20.6	19.1	29.4
	3	6.6	14.4	4.3	18.7
	4	.3	1.6	0.0	0.0
	5	.3	3.4	.4	0.0
	6	.2	.9	.8	0.0
	7	.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
	8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	10	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Poor	Total percent	99.8%	100.0%	100.1%	100.0%
	(Number)	(1,790)	(320)	(1,689)	(262)
		X^2 (6 df)	$p < .001$	X^2 (4 df)	$p < .001$

Source: 1986 and 1988 National Election Studies and the election administration studies for those surveys.

Note: The values for the interviewers' evaluations ranged from 0 through 10. A rating of 1 is "Excellent: I am very confident that if the respondent is registered, a record would be found." A rating of 10 is "Poor: It is very possible that a registration record does exist for respondents for whom I have been unable to locate one, but the way this office is organized, it would take an infinite amount of time to find it."

INTERVIEWER ASSESSMENTS AND REPORTED AND VALIDATED TURNOUT

Table 3 presents the percentage of respondents who accurately and inaccurately reported voting² in 1986 and 1988, controlling for the respondents' race and the interviewer assessment of record-keeping quality. In 1986,

² In both 1986 and 1988 we measure validated turnout by using the summary measure of whether or not the respondent voted (Variable 802 in 1986; Variable 1147 in 1988). The 1986 survey is based upon a postelection interview; the 1988 survey includes a pre- and postelection interview, but we restrict our analysis to respondents included in the postelection interview. For both years respondents coded 11 were classified as voters, those coded 21, 22, 24, 31, and 32 were classified as nonvoters, and all other cases were classified as not ascertained. In both 1986 and 1988 (as well as 1984) the SRC did not check the records of respondents who said they were not registered to vote and who said they did not vote. These respondents were automatically classified as validated nonvoters. Before 1984, the SRC attempted to determine whether respondents voted even if they said that they were not registered and said that they did not vote. In earlier vote validation studies about 1% of the respondents were validated voters who said that they had not voted.

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO ACCURATELY AND INACCURATELY REPORTED VOTING, BY RACE
OF RESPONDENT AND INTERVIEWER ASSESSMENT OF RECORD-KEEPING QUALITY: 1986 AND 1988

Interviewer's Assessment of Record Keeping Quality: ^a	1986								Total
	Excellent		Not Quite Excellent		Relatively Poor		White	Black	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black			
Respondent's Postselection Self-Report	NES Vote Validation Evidence								
Says Voted	49.3%	29.4%	44.4%	46.9%	24.0%	34.4%	46.3%	34.1%	
Says Voted	6.1	15.3	6.2	18.8	16.3	14.8	6.9	15.9	
Says Did Not	44.6	55.4	49.4	34.4	59.7	50.8	46.8	50.0	
Total percentage ^b	100.1%	100.1%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Total N	(1,194)	(177)	(385)	(64)	(129)	(61)	(1,708)	(302)	
1988									
Says Voted	64.1%	39.0%	62.2%	41.3%	59.7%	33.3%	63.5%	38.7%	
Says Voted	7.3	19.0	13.1	25.4	16.9	16.7	8.9	20.6	
Says Did Not	28.6	41.9	24.7	33.3	23.4	50.0	27.6	40.7	
Total percentage ^b	100.0%	99.9%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Total N	(1,095)	(105)	(259)	(63)	(77)	(36)	(1,431)	(204)	

Source: 1986 and 1988 National Election Studies and the election administration studies and the vote validation studies for these surveys.
Notes: ^aRatings of 1 are classified as excellent; ratings of 2 are classified as not quite excellent; and ratings of 3 or more are classified as relatively poor. ^bThere were no respondents who said they did not vote who were classified as actual voters by the vote validation studies. See note 2 for an explanation of why there were no respondents in this category.

validated turnout is very low for whites who live in units classified as relatively poor; among blacks, on the other hand, turnout is somewhat higher among respondents living in units that are not classified as excellent. In 1988 validated turnout among whites is only slightly lower among respondents living in areas with relatively poor record keeping, but among blacks there is no systematic relationship between validated turnout and the quality of the registration records.

Two findings are particularly important for rejecting the thesis that relatively high levels of black overreporting are artifactual. First, in both 1986 and 1988, there was no relationship among blacks between record-keeping quality and false reports of voting. Second, among respondents living in areas classified as excellent or not quite excellent, reported turnout either underestimates the extent to which whites are more likely to vote than blacks, or incorrectly suggests that blacks are more likely to vote than whites. This finding does not hold among respondents living in areas classified as poor, but no more than 7.6% of the whites and 20.2% of the blacks live in such areas.

Further analyses demonstrate that racial differences in vote overreports do not result from blacks living in areas with poorly maintained records. Log-linear analyses demonstrate that racial differences in voting overreports are statistically significant even when controls are introduced for record-keeping quality. In these analyses, vote overreporting was the dependent variable and race and subjective quality of record-keeping were the independent variables. For both 1986 and 1988 we conducted analyses for all the respondents and for the subset of validated nonvoters; analyses were conducted both with and without race times quality of record-keeping interactions. In all cases, the race term remained statistically significant at at least the .05 level.

CONCLUSIONS

The widely reported finding that blacks are more likely to overreport voting than whites does not appear to be a methodological artifact. We employed five objective measures of record-keeping quality and found no evidence that blacks were more likely than whites to live in areas with poorly maintained records. Blacks are more likely to live in electoral units classified as less than excellent by SRC interviewers; nonetheless, most blacks live in areas classified as either excellent or almost excellent. Moreover, among blacks there is no systematic relationship between the quality of record keeping, as measured by the interviewers' judgment, and the tendency to overreport voting.

We cannot definitively reject the possibility that the tendency for blacks to overreport voting is artifactual. The objective measures of record-keeping

quality are based upon information provided by election officials and they do not directly measure the difficulty of locating records. Subjective measures may be biased since interviewers may adjust their evaluations of record-keeping quality to the standards they encounter in their own locality or region. Perhaps racial differences in the quality of record keeping are greater than the election administration studies indicate. But the two election administration studies provide the best available data to question the widely reported findings that blacks are more likely to overreport voting than whites. Our analysis suggests that these racial differences do not result from inferior record keeping in areas where blacks live. The validation procedures appear to provide reliable evidence about racial differences in turnout, and we urge that they be continued in future NES surveys.

Manuscript submitted 8 November 1990

Final manuscript received 10 October 1991

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